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Chen Xiaoming; Liu Kang; Anbin Shi

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## The Mysterious Other: Postpolitics in Chinese Film

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**Chen Xiaoming**

*Translated by Liu Kang and Anbin Shi*

In an interview with French TV, the production crew of the film *To Live* placed an empty chair on the set for Zhang Yimou, the director, to symbolize the presence of politics in his absence. As a mysterious signifier, the chair can be seen as a historical subtext in Chinese films. In fact, politics plays a decisive role in contemporary Chinese motion pictures—not only in the ideologically oriented orthodoxy but also in Fifth Generation films that deviate from the mainstream. In the tight fists of the revolutionary discourse, the Chinese film industry is characterized by a fully developed and omnipotent code of politics. However, in the Fifth Generation oeuvres that aim at artistic experimentation and internationalization, the political codes are divorced from the ideological practices of the state and are transformed into motifs, signs of cultural identity or superimposed sociohistorical backgrounds. Politics becomes a highly stylized, stereotyped, complicated, and ambiguous symbol, a hallmark of Chinese cinematic narratology. The multifarious functions of political codes constitute a peculiar narratological ambience in which Chinese film is produced, circulated, watched, and inter-

puted. Such a manipulation of political codes can be labeled "postpolitics" in Chinese film, where everything is political and nothing is political at one and the same time. Politics is everywhere, and yet it subverts itself at any moment.

In the 1990s, Chinese film is marching aggressively toward the world market. Therefore, postpolitics in Chinese film not only animates native cultural production but also manages to dance to the tunes set forth by the Western cultural imaginary about China. As such, concepts such as *post-modernity* or *postcolonialism* cannot adequately describe the complexity and ambiguity of this power relationship. The purpose of this essay is to unravel the means by which the omnipresent politics is mysteriously transformed into the revolutionary narrative, and to see how politics constitutes a symbolic act, replete with paradoxes, in contemporary Chinese film.

### **1. Rewriting and Reconfiguring History: The Abstraction of Politics**

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the apex of the revolutionary discourse in China. An edifice of the revolutionary myth of history was erected, under which literature and the arts served as the Communist panacea for the enlightenment and unification of the people and as a lethal weapon to eradicate the "capitalist influence." Under such circumstances, the Chinese film industry, like any other form of cultural production, "undertook the task of providing visual representations of the orthodox historical discourse, and, in turn, those historical representations were entitled to an important position in the mainstream ideology."<sup>1</sup> Films directed by Xie Jin epitomized this ideological function of Chinese cinema during this period. Despite the incessant ideological campaigns aimed at the realm of culture that assaulted "anti-Party" tendencies among artists, few Chinese writers and artists publicly espoused political dissent during those years.

In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, historical narratives that exposed the previous dark decade took on the twofold objective of redefining the relationship between the arts and politics and of resurrecting humanism as the core of literature and the arts. The political interests of writers and artists had by no means diminished. Instead, the anti-Cultural Revolution historical narrative served to reinforce political passion by providing an aes-

1. Li Yimin, "Xie Jin dianying zai Zhongguo dianying shi shang de diwei" (Xie Jin's films in the history of Chinese cinema), *Dianying yishu* (Cinema art) 2 (1990): 9.

thetic representation of the ideological emancipation movement of the New Era of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Films produced during this period bear a close relationship to the political campaigns of the time. One of the then highly acclaimed feature films, *The Legend of Mount Tianyun* (Xie Jin, 1980), for instance, tried to express its political theme through the love affairs of its male and female protagonists. Its goal was to attenuate political concerns by promulgating humane feelings and sensitivity and by extolling romantic love and beauty. However, the reconstitution of the intellectuals' loyalty to the Communist Party was the film's unmistakable thesis, no matter how the producer tried to romanticize it. Obviously, the film's high romantic sentiment and humanism were in line with the official political orientation. Love and humanism were indeed the true desires of intellectuals, who wanted to break away from the domination of ultraleftist policies; therefore, romanticism and humanism were integrated into the practices of the prevalent ideology, constituting an imaginary commonwealth in which the Party and the intellectuals reached a consensus and a mutual understanding.

The political campaign of ideological emancipation came to an end in the mid-1980s. At that time, the happy ideological marriage between the Party and the intellectuals began to break down, as shown by the increasing schism between the discourse of the political power and that of the intellectuals. The earlier, anti-Cultural Revolution historical narrative that promoted "Marxist humanism" gave way to theories of alienation under socialism, literary and philosophical (and, indeed, existential) subjectivities, and holistic antitraditionalism or iconoclasm. In the arena of literature and the arts, the inevitable rise of modernism gradually eroded the revolutionary discourse. The impassioned enthusiasm for artistic innovation and aesthetic novelty ultimately pushed the revolutionary discourse to its limit. As a result, the revolutionary discourse was deeply entrenched in an irresolvable dilemma: On the one hand, it still policed all cultural activities with its institutional power; on the other hand, it lacked an effective system of ideology and representation that could accommodate itself to the new sociohistorical developments. Motivated by the call for innovation and novelty, writers and artists then plunged into bold adventures charted by modernism. Modernism furnished the generation of the 1980s not only with new artistic concepts and ideas but also with new ways of expression and representation. Largely inspired by the modernist aesthetics of innovation, this generation of Chinese artists was able to detach itself from authority and, as such, succeeded in distinguishing itself from its predecessors.

Challenging the orthodox aesthetic principles of "revolutionary real-

ism," the emergence of the Fifth Generation filmmakers effected an imaginary act of rebellion rather than an aesthetic revolution. This was the moment when the dominant ideology, on which earlier films were dependent, ran aground. Any experiment, however limited in its scope, was viewed as a violation of the aesthetic principles of revolutionary realism. Such a rigid cultural hegemony could not adapt to, nor would accept, any new artistic forms and expressions. It could only exercise its institutional power of control and restrictions. In this context, the Fifth Generation films have a twofold significance: They differ fundamentally from earlier, ideologically centered films, and they also threaten to subvert the ideological authority and its discourse. Therefore, the Fifth Generation filmmakers reluctantly took on the role of rebels on the periphery of the dominant ideology.

*The One and the Eight* (Zhang Junzhao, 1984), the Fifth Generation's debut, shocked audiences with its overwhelmingly subjective camera perspectives and arbitrary long shots. One may wonder why Zhang Junzhao went to such great lengths to reiterate the revolutionary myth of the Anti-Japanese War. It perhaps embodied "the social order of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which restored the collectivity of fathers and served in the meantime as a self-defense for the 'deviant' Fifth Generation artists who were viewed as aberrant."<sup>2</sup> However, it is difficult to identify any specific political reference in the film's revolutionary myth. In this film, one no longer sees the kind of heroism and absolute loyalty to the revolution that was seen in earlier revolutionary realist films. The historical circumstances narrated in the film are evasive and indeterminate. But still, since revolutionary myth as subject matter legitimizes avant-garde experimentation within the framework of the revolutionary discourse, it is a strategic choice. On the other hand, the film employs a plethora of unconventional techniques, such as fragmented narration, abrupt long shots that intersect close-ups, and long scenes with muffled off-camera sound effects that generate a bizarre sense of repression and repulsiveness. The film capitalizes on the unique circumstances of hardship and the violence of war as a space for the repressive narrative and for technological and formal experimentation, but it also distorts this revolutionary myth beyond recognition. Since technical and stylistic innovation outweighs subject matter, revolutionary history and politics recede into the negligible background. Just as revolutionary discourse is replaced by a long interlude of silence, political codes of revolution become

2. Dai Jinhua, "Duanqiao, ci yidai de yishu" (Broken bridge: The art of the next generation), *Dianying yishu* (Cinema art) 2 (1990): 139-40.

abstract and are transformed into striking graphic and narrative designs bereft of any specific meaning. In other words, the seemingly canonical legend of revolution is reduced to a by-product of the artistic experimentation, through which Fifth Generation filmmakers call the authoritative revolutionary discourse into question. By the same token, repeated queries about loyalty, misunderstanding, wrongdoing, and morality in *The One and the Eight* severely undermine the legitimacy of the revolutionary myth.

Such a reinterpretation of the revolutionary myth is echoed in *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984). As a film that recounts the revolutionary history, it maximizes the abstraction of the revolutionary myth by turning the center of the film (revolutionary legend) into a lonely symbolic figure. Because the camera is placed on the broad vista of the yellow earth, where the revolutionary myth originated, the revolution also becomes a narrative perspective. Only a land of extreme poverty and hardship could generate the revolutionary myth, as well as the unadorned folklore of the peasants. What does Chen Kaige want to find? Is it the “human relationship,” as he put it?<sup>3</sup> What is the ideal humanity, human understanding, and friendship? Chen once acknowledged that his goal for the film was to explore the “humane” relationships between a revolutionary soldier, a stubborn peasant, and the peasant’s daughter. Scenes that try to capture humane moments—such as when Gu Qing, the soldier, Cuiqiao, the peasant girl, and Cuiqiao’s father are sitting around the peasants’ hut, and Cuiqiao gives her father the shoes she made for him—are intended to demonstrate the authenticity of the origin of the myth, as pure and simple as native folklore. However, history hindered and altered the trajectory of revolution. In the end, the soldier fails to save the girl from the coercive marriage arranged by her father and the village matchmaker. The helpless girl vanishes from the scene like an unrecognizable tiny dot fading on a gigantic canvas. Something went wrong in the origin of this revolutionary myth. Humane understanding and compassion are limited and transient, while nonchalance and misunderstanding seem permanent. In the highly acclaimed scene of “praying for rain,” Gu Qing, the soldier, returns. But none of the local folks recognizes him, and no one seems to pay any attention to the stranger. The peasants are busy worshipping the God of Rain instead of the God of Revolution. Gu Qing, the very symbol of revolution, appears superfluous and alienated under these circumstances. He is an arbitrarily superimposed signifier, completely out of context.

3. See Tony Rayns, *Video, New Chinese Cinema, Director* (London: Routledge, 1988).

Of course, it would be an exaggeration to say that Chen Kaige intentionally rewrote the revolutionary myth. Actually, the meaning of the film is rather confused and contradictory. The question is not what he wanted to express—Chen Kaige didn't seem to intend to express any meaning. To him, a soldier, the yellow earth, the Yellow River, and the caves were sufficient in themselves. The film can be described in Taoist aesthetic terms as a "grand image without a form" or as a "grand sound without a tone." It presents an immense physical space with a vast and low horizon, as well as a boundless yellow earth. These grand images are the objects frozen by tedious long shots. And an aphasic crowd in these silent, frozen scenes further underscores the enormity and physicality of the long shots of scenery. This is a world in which physical objects overwhelm human subjects. In this world of yellow earth composed by history and culture (or of history and culture composed by yellow earth), the destinies of human beings are long predetermined. The locus of the film is obviously not the story, which the revolutionary myth prescribes; rather, it is the aesthetic form itself. The form compresses the revolutionary myth to the most abstract level and rewrites it through the formalist language of the camera.

The Fifth Generation filmmakers were defined by this bold experimentation with artistic form on the ideological margins. Formal experiment endowed their work with a certain historical legitimacy. Formal experiment then became a symbolic act, an imaginary resolution of the real contradictions.<sup>4</sup> It appears now rather arbitrary and contrived, but it gathered the real contradictions and offered some resolutions. The act of rewriting the revolutionary myth became a way to escape being manipulated by the orthodox political discourse. As a result, the revolutionary myth was transformed into stereotyped political codes, which provided the camera with infinite possibilities for maneuvering between the nuances of politics and literature. What was important was not *what* to tell but *how* to tell, and such a formalist motto was faithfully observed by the Fifth Generation. "How to tell" emerged as the primary aesthetic question to be tackled. As Zheng Dongtian put it, "Film must be made like a film first."<sup>5</sup> Politics, in this process of artistic renovation, was relegated to the periphery. However, this is not to say that the Fifth Generation was apolitical. Its politics lay in the very act of seemingly apolitical, formal, and aesthetic experimentation. In

4. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).

5. See Rayns, *Video, New Chinese Cinema, Director*, 6.

the Fifth Generation films dominated by the repugnance for the ideological mainstream, anything apolitical was thus turned political, and vice versa.

## 2. The Dislocated Imagination: Politics and Cultural Identity

The Fifth Generation filmmakers have amputated and encapsulated the orthodox political discourse in a reservoir of mythologies, a cultural resource that can be manipulated, in order to subjugate the stereotypical discourse of politics to artistic experimentation. When "culture" became the central motif of the Fifth Generation, politics was turned into culture's supplement. A good case in point is *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987), a film, based on Mo Yan's novel, that again introduces the revolutionary myth of the Anti-Japanese War. Rather than offering a conventional eulogy of the Communist leadership during that time, *Red Sorghum* resorts to a naturalistic expression of the nation's vital power by means of a legendary love-and-death story. As a disguised political code, the revolutionary historical legend merely serves to bring to dramatic climax the romance between the narrator's "grandpa and grandma" and their heroic ambush of Japanese invaders. Expressions of primitive passion, the joys of love-making, and the slaughter in the sorghum fields all lead to the climax of the film, which reflects nothing less than the tenacity of the nation's existence.

Such a national character, or cultural essence, constituted the very spiritual basis of Chinese society in the late 1980s. The philosophical debates about antitraditionalism were then ironically transformed into a discussion about the global issue of cultural identity, by the involvement of the overseas "new Confucianism" movement. Under the banner of "root searching," a cultural fad in the late 1980s, writers who were "educated youth" (or former Red Guards) found an excuse to retreat from modernism and triumphantly proclaimed their retreat a grand march in search of national roots and origins. The problems of contemporary China that could not be dealt with in the antitradition debate, which was a thinly disguised critique of the present, could now be solved in the ambiguities of root searching. The answer in Mo Yan's novel (and in the film) lies in the primitive passion of the nation, embodied in the grandpa's way of living, which reveals the ideological dilemma—the individual can refuse to accept any preordained concept or grand ideology. *Red Sorghum*, then, by the end of the 1980s, became a symbol of the moment when culture was rewritten as something that existed above and beyond politics. But culture was, at the same time, construed as a counterculture phenomenon of the "way of life,"

an instinctual behavior driven by repressed libido. It signified nothing less than the subversion of the social power structure. Politics was thus turned upside down, to become again a historical subtext of the film.

As a film that strays from the ideological mainstream, *Red Sorghum* gives full expression to the zeitgeist of casting off sociopolitical and cultural yokes. In some sense, the critical praise it won both at home and abroad was proof that the omnipotence of political codes had almost ceased to exist, except in name. Far from the orthodox ideological discourse, the carnival of life depicted in the film was intended to provide an emotional catharsis and cause a spectacular sensation. *Red Sorghum* marks both an end and a beginning. When ideology can no longer sustain its intellectual and rational grip on society, and can only assert itself through emotional relief that provides society with nothing more than a momentary spectacle, the demise of the orthodox ideological practice becomes imminent.

Politics never has the final say in the films of the Fifth Generation; instead, politics is subjugated by culture and deconstructed in the name of artistic experimentation. Politics becomes a style that only resembles the politics in canonical revolutionary films in a formal sense. In terms of meaning and substance, however, it is ambiguous and indeterminate. But this does not mean that politics is not important to the Fifth Generation. On the contrary, their films are sustained by revolutionary discourse. Politics serves as the very identity of Chinese oeuvres in the international film market by virtue of the fact that politics is the most effective means and raw material for the artistic expressions of Fifth Generation Chinese cinema. Of course, Zhang Yimou certainly wants to avoid politics and tries to downplay the importance of politics in most of his films. But once his films enter the world film market, politics inevitably captures the spotlight. Hence, in the eyes of a Western beholder, Zhang Yimou's *Judou* (1991) is interpreted as an innuendo against the gerontocracy, and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1992) is seen as a political power struggle. Political readings of these Chinese films are not necessarily far-fetched misreadings insofar as the cultural imaginary of Oriental culture has always already inculcated an invisible, but omnipresent, nexus of absolute power and totalitarianism, which overshadows Zhang Yimou's, and others', films. It does not matter whether such a power nexus refers to ancient feudalism or despotism, or to the "proletariat dictatorship" of modern China, for the cultural imaginary of Oriental culture is fundamentally timeless—the present is all but a reappearance of the past. Politics is thus a determinant situation in the cultural imaginary of China. In the Foucauldian view, sexuality and politics are two sides of

the same coin. Augmented by sexual themes, Chinese politics can only become more interesting to the Western audience.

Fredric Jameson's insight into the relationship between Third World politics and art—"the narratives about personal destiny contain a national fable in which mass culture and society encounter tremendous challenges"<sup>6</sup>—best illustrates what took place in the Chinese cultural arena during the mid-1980s. However, the late 1980s saw the decentralization of the orthodox ideology and a split between the public and the private, between poetics and politics, between sexuality, the subconscious, and the secular world characterized by class, economy, and political power.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1990s, Chinese artists have in effect strayed from political and ideological practices and have become increasingly individualistic in their expressions. In contrast, the films that "go out into the world" are more emphatically political and have national allegorical themes. Films chronicling the lives of human beings all tend to reinforce the national and collective identity of China. *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1992) can be seen as a chronicle of the modern Chinese revolution. Personal biographies are embedded in the twentieth-century Chinese history of the republican revolution, the civil war between warlords, the Anti-Japanese War, the civil war between the Communists and the Guomindang, the socialist reform, and the Cultural Revolution. The historical vicissitudes that people endured have added a significant complexity and enrichment to the stories of their lives. The image of China in this film is not characterized by the Peking opera or by the homosexual relationship between the male protagonists but rather by the diachronic political catastrophes in modern Chinese history. Only the political events can properly delineate the contours of a modern China in the global cultural imaginary. If in Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, the revolutionary myth is subjugated under the culture myth, serving only as a marginal discourse, then in *Farewell My Concubine*, culture is displaced by politics, which constitutes the dominant discourse of the film.

The trials and tribulations of Cheng Dieyi, the hero of the film, are inextricably intertwined with China's modern revolutionary history. Even his sexual orientation is political, insofar as his intimacy with his "brother" is fostered not so much by pure brotherhood as it is by his fear of the imperial

6. Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (fall 1986): 65-88.

7. Chen Xiaoming, "Zhuti yu huanxiang zhi wu—xin shiqi wenxue de yishi xingtai tuilun shijian" (Subjectivity and the imaginary—The ideological practices of the literature in the new era), *Zhongshan* 1 (1993): 57-72.

eunuch and the warlords. Homosexuality is thereby endowed with a political message, one that reveals the political history by which personal preferences and lifestyles have been fatalistically circumscribed. Predetermined by political history, Cheng Dieyi's personal fate becomes, to a large extent, a symbol of modern history, manipulatable by revolutionary movements. Political conflicts dominate the second half of the film. Obviously, such an abusive use of politics diminishes the exploration of the human psyche. However, as Ping-hui Liao puts it, "to reconstruct large historical events through collective memories may provide Westerners with a bird's-eye view of modern Chinese history and may satisfy their curiosity about the Orient."<sup>8</sup> Chen Kaige's adroit manipulation of political codes won him international acclaim, including first prize at Cannes and an Oscar nomination.

Chen Kaige's film version of modern Chinese history is divorced from the ideological mainstream and caters primarily to the West's cultural imaginary about China, in which politics not only constitutes the dominant narrative situation but also serves as an indispensable essential constituent of China's history and culture. But what is the "authentic" cultural identity of China? Is it the poverty depicted in *Old Well* (Wu Tianming, 1987)? The primitive rituals in *Red Sorghum*? The incest in *Judou*? The power struggle among the concubines in *Raise the Red Lantern*? The Peking opera in *Farewell My Concubine*? The shadow puppet play in *To Live* (Zhang Yimou, 1994)? In all these films, politics serves as the very identity of China, without which all the stories about human beings would lose their exotic appeal as representing an absolute Other. It is not surprising that even in 1994, Tian Zhuangzhuang produced *Blue Kite*, a film that rehearses the political hardships during the Antirightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution in the 1950s and 1960s. The film reiterates the thematics of the "scar literature" of the late 1970s, which portrays political persecution and fear. To be sure, this particular historical period may have left an indelible impression in Tian's mind, and his film indeed serves as a reminder of that unforgettable era. However, Tian's reconstruction of the outmoded Fourth Generation films yields little more than a well-conceived reproduction of the "China image" in the Western cultural imaginary.

Politics in Fifth Generation films became an effective narrative strategy that integrated politics, ethnography, and sexuality, and was thus

8. Ping-hui Liao, "Shi kong yu xingbie de cuoluan: Lun bawang bie ji" (The displacements of time, space, and sexuality: A Reading of *Farewell My Concubine*), *Chung-wai Literary Monthly* 22, no. 1 (1993): 10.

conducive to the mass production of an exotic Other in the transnational film market. Following their frustrated honeymoon with modernism, Fifth Generation filmmakers resorted to the mystification of political codes as their dominant narrative strategy in the globalized cultural context. Endowed with certain traits of postmodernism and postcolonialism, their films created an unprecedented spectacle characterized by recurrent political persecutions and omnipresent totalitarianism, a politics that is the legacy of the ancient dynasties and that has culminated in the history of revolution. It is no coincidence that the recurrence of this history serves as a metaphorical innuendo to today's sociopolitical situation. In some sense, the present, always absent in the Fifth Generation's reverie about the past, is the historical subtext, always already embedded in personal stories. What is important is not the time of the story but the time of telling the story. Telling the story of the past in the present, when intertwined with the story per se, creates a peculiar effect of the "real" that otherwise irrelevant political symbols have all but displaced.

### **3. Subversion and Reappropriation: The Dialectics of Aesthetics**

When Fifth Generation filmmakers arrived on the scene for the first time, they still had to rely on the revolutionary hegemony and draw on the revolutionary myth for their raw materials. They reinterpreted the canonical revolutionary myth in their own artistic symbolic act. However, when they determined to pursue the international film market, they severed politics from China's social and historical practices and turned the former into a cultural fountain to quench the Western thirst for a mystified China. Without politics as the inexhaustible theme and primary cultural background, Fifth Generation films would have received little international attention. However, it would be equally wrong to view politics as the only obstacle to Chinese cinema. The question is: How does one appropriate the political as a cultural resource? When employed as a narrative mechanism rather than as an oversimplified cultural label, political symbols create powerful aesthetic effects.

Zhang Yimou's *To Live* is a good example of such a creative appropriation of political symbols. Throughout the film, Zhang attaches great significance to politics, which is the trademark of China's cultural identity in the international film market. Personal lives again bear all the traces of a political history of revolution, from civil war to the incessant political

campaigns after the establishment of New China. The protagonist Fu Gui's personal odyssey to survive recurrent political hardships gives full expression to the basic life philosophy of the Chinese people—"to live is good." Its tragic dimension is revealed by the revolutionary history, which makes even the most fundamental needs of life unattainable luxuries. Which one—the political ebb and flow, or the will of Heaven—has the final say in human fortunes? Zhang Yimou apparently remains ambivalent on this issue (an ambivalence he may owe to the decidedly apolitical Yu Hua, the author of the novel from which the film is adapted). Despite all the ambiguities, politics still directly determines the lives of individuals, not through specific political cadres (such as the district governor, Chunsheng, who is a nice man but also a victim) but through the invisible political network that overshadows the everyday life of each human being.

The film is split into two halves with incongruous styles. The first half is characterized by its linear chronology that blends political history with cultural history, deliberately setting the stage to conform to the Western image of China. This part of the narrative bears Zhang Yimou's distinctive style—repressive, closed, linear, and orientalist. The second half, however, turns out to be a political parody with a hybridized narrative style that constantly shifts modes and perspectives. In the first half, politics is included simply to appeal to the Western audience; but in the second half, political events become incorporated into the texture of the narrative in order to arouse and reverse simultaneously the imagination of the audience. Such a narrative smuggles in the classic technique of suspense film, in which the occurrence of events is always abrupt and unexpected.

*To Live's* wedding scene is a good example of this technique. When Fu Gui and his wife are shopping for the occasion, a neighbor hurries to inform them of an unexpected crowd in their yard. They rush back home, thinking that some disaster looms. Breathless, they arrive only to find that their would-be son-in-law and his friends are painting a gigantic mural of the Great Helmsman on the front wall of their yard in preparation for the wedding. In another long shot that appears rather abruptly, a throng of Red Guards parades with a deafening roar, shouting revolutionary slogans and waving red banners and giant posters. This scene of demonstration is reminiscent of everyday life during the Cultural Revolution, which was suffused with fear and terror. Rather than a much expected scene of violence, what follows is a tender moment when the parents (Fu Gui and his wife) feel genuinely touched by their crippled son-in-law, who has come with all his friends and fellow workers to greet the bride, their mute daughter. As

soon as the audience's expectations and curiosity are aroused, a comic reversal occurs. This has become a pattern that, in the end, fulfills expectations that nevertheless draw heavily on the narrative's peculiar historical situation—the tragicomic ambience of the Cultural Revolution. Permeated with aesthetic dialectics in the era of posttragedy, the unexpected turns and developments of the much consecrated Cultural Revolution and of secular pursuits of happiness result in a drama that blends tragic and comic elements.

As I have indicated, the stereotyped politics is conducive to the construction of the internal and/or external symbolic act in contemporary Chinese film. Jiang Wen, a much younger, Sixth Generation actor-director in China, recaptures the sexual pursuits and merrymaking of juvenile delinquents during the Cultural Revolution in his film debut, *In the Heat of the Sun* (1996)—or, more accurately, *Bright Sunny Days*, as Liu Kang points out.<sup>9</sup> Wang Shuo's novel *Ferocious Animals*, from which the film is adapted, focuses on the sex lives, sexual fantasies, and revelry of the adolescent protagonists. It is a collective account, with no apparent animosity for its own historical context. Jiang Wen, however, rewrites the title as *Bright Sunny Days* in order to convey a different experience. Activities such as sexual fantasies, girl chasing, fisticuffs, and partying show a very different side of the Cultural Revolution. By all standard accounts, the Cultural Revolution was a destructive and catastrophic national disaster, as depicted in Fourth and Fifth Generation films. But in Jiang Wen's narrative, "it becomes a dream of the young and the restless, of a bunch of brazen, adventurous youngsters ablaze with the passions of love and hate."<sup>10</sup> Obviously, Jiang Wen has a bittersweet nostalgia for that period, which he reveals in great detail through private memories. The adolescent libido, rather than political codes, dominates Jiang's sentimental narrative, which eludes any possible association with the politically oriented national allegory. It no longer projects an epic vision of power struggles and politics but draws a portrait of private lives in their naked and natural forms. Free from direct repression by the political power, the protagonists are a carefree, reckless gang who experience the Cultural Revolution only as playful, carnivalesque "bright sunny days," not as gloomy, disastrous nightmares. The personal histories, the personal predicaments encountered in sexual awakening, and the difficulties of being

9. See Liu Kang's article, "Popular Culture and the Culture of the Masses in Contemporary China" in this special issue of *boundary 2*, 99–122.

10. Jiang Wen, "Ranshao de qingchun meng" (The burning dreams of the young), *Dang-dai dianying* (Contemporary cinema) 1 (1996): 59.

accepted by the group are all imbued with Kafkaesque bizarreness and jocundity. As the dominant theme, sex guarantees the successful evasion of political allegory. The concentration on sex also casts doubt on the plausibility of the historical events narrated in the film. For instance, Ma Xiaojun's skepticism of Mi Lan's real existence and the incommensurability of the portrait of the young girl and Mi Lan the real person seem to reinforce the suspicion of the reliability of all the classic accounts of the era. Jiang Wen uses color to express the "bright sunny days" of the Cultural Revolution, but he uses black and white to express the present, which he tends to reject. Even a fool in the film curses the flashy Cadillac and the Napoleon X.O. cognac, status symbols of the newly rich of the 1990s, as "fucking stupid." However, Jiang Wen's nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution cannot be said to come at the expense of the present. He states, "Although the fire was put out, there are still flickers amid the ashes. Who says all the passion is gone forever?"<sup>11</sup> Of course, to Jiang Wen, the reality of the present, which is anything but "bright sunny days" and banal, adolescent passion, must be relentlessly castigated. And it is clear that his memory of adolescent passion is entirely different from the standard version of the time.

The adolescent fervor of the 1960s that has resurfaced in recent years has, in fact, very little to do with the ideological practices of contemporary China. The sentimentality of private nostalgia has significantly diluted the political colors of the Cultural Revolution. Ironically, however, the Sixth Generation's infatuation with libidinal impulses is inevitably embedded in the sociopolitical subtext. Jiang Wen capitalizes on the historical context of the Cultural Revolution in his film to make it appear nonconformist. The more he pays attention to issues of libidinal wish fulfillment, the more his narrative is entangled in the political current of canon rewriting. *In the Heat of the Sun* (or *Bright Sunny Days*), for instance, won international acclaim for its repugnance of the traditional political codes—the cultural identity of China. In some sense, politics, as the external subtext and internal context, maintains its mysterious omnipotence in Chinese film.

#### 4. The Insurmountable Obstacle and the New Narratology

Politics, as I have pointed out, has been the determining factor in the reconstruction of the image of "China" in the West. Without the strategic employment of political codes, Chinese film would lose its cultural

11. Jiang, "Ranshao," 59.

identity and consequently be denied international recognition. But Zhang Yimou, the reputed *enfant gâté* of international film festivals, experienced a crushing rejection with *Shanghai Triad* (1995), a direct, if not heavy-handed, imitation of a Hollywood film noir. The failure of the film was due to its cultural ambivalence, and this ambivalence was the direct result of its apolitical narrative strategy. For the sake of producing a commercial movie for the domestic market, Zhang Yimou broke from the Western cultural imaginary of China, which had been a trademark of his films. In *Shanghai Triad*, Zhang Yimou wanted, above all, to redefine his own style. But the film went too far and had too many facets, no obvious political identity, and no clear goal, wavering between entertainment and serious art. For example, Zhang Yimou shows the swinging legs of go-go dancers amid the hubbub of urban existence, but he also implies a nostalgia for the idyllic, rural life: The Chinese title, which translates literally as "Row to Grandma's bridge," comes from a popular children's swinging song and can easily be interpreted as evoking a pastoral scene in the Chinese context. But it would be superficial to see this as Zhang making a simple contrast between the values and lifestyles of city and countryside. In fact, the film aims at a serious exploration of the social and cultural origin of Chinese modernity—one of the blind spots in the study of modern Chinese history.

In Zhang's film, Chinese modernity is inevitably interwoven with the patriarchal clan system. Setting foot in such a modern metropolis as Shanghai, the rural bullies and landlords immediately form Mafia-like gangs for their clandestine and illegal business. Although they are engaged in modern forms of trade and commerce such as banking and savings and loans, the ways in which their businesses operate are entirely determined by the traditional clan system. In the very process of modernization, those who show any truly modern spirit will ultimately be banished by the clan, which determines and steers the course of modernity. The hero and heroine's quest for modernity—which includes a love affair, plans for a wedding in Paris, and a modern education—is considered an act of disobedience by the clan authority. The couple's individualistic pursuits and strategies for reforming tradition all fail, and they are sentenced to death, to be buried alive.

In some sense, Zhang intended to reveal a tragic paradox: Modernization in China had to be accomplished in traditional ways. Despite the ambiguities and ambivalence, his reflection on China's way to modernity was quite provocative. However, few paid attention to this serious examination of the fate of modernity in China because of its radical change in style, from an exotic and ethnographic depiction of folk tradition to some-

thing very much like the early Hollywood musical or second-rate gangster movie. When the English title of the film became *Shanghai Triad*, it inevitably alluded to the generic features of Hollywood musicals and westerns. In short, this film, because of its lack of distinctive political codes and features of oriental despotism, fails to be identified in the Western cultural imaginary about China. Zhang Yimou tried to create a new narrative style to portray the complex origins of history and the dense textures of everyday life, but stereotyped politics had become an insurmountable obstacle for contemporary Chinese cinema, an obstacle even Zhang Yimou could not overcome.

Arriving on the heels of the controversial Fifth Generation, the ambitious Sixth Generation filmmakers based their work on individualism and market-oriented opportunism. Their films sever all connections with the revolutionary discourse and/or the artistic experimentation advocated by their predecessors. The appearance of the Sixth Generation is not the result of artistic renovation but rather the outcome of the market-driven opportunism that permeates today's cultural arena. These filmmakers act self-consciously as fearless iconoclasts and, accordingly, push the limit in whatever they do, hoping the public accepts their work as artistically revolutionary. Despite complaints about political constraints and the lack of political freedom, the Sixth Generation never uses politics as their main motif. They have no interest in politics, for few remember the days when politics was everything. Wary of any political interference with their films, they undertake an artistic vaudeville with the purpose of subverting the existing conventions. Black-and-white frames, simultaneous sound tracks, shabby studios, and maladroit, yet true-to-life, performances by amateur actors and actresses distinguish the Sixth Generation as a group of rebels and misfits.

*Beijing Bastards* (Zhang Yuan, 1991) portrays the reckless lifestyle of Chinese rock-and-roll singers. Deeply rooted in their antipathy toward institutionalized power structures — political, social, and artistic — they indulge themselves in making money, having sex, and producing unconventional artwork. Time and again, however, libidinal wish fulfillment is inevitably implicated in a political myth of counterrepression. The unconventional pastiche of black-and-white shots and close-ups insinuates the anti-institutional stance of these self-styled unconventional artists. The title *Beijing Bastards*, with "the eggs under the red flag" (the title of a popular song by the rock star Cui Jian) as a sociological marker of the post-1949 generations, sheds light

on the Sixth Generation's manipulation of the connection between politics and commercialism.

The Sixth Generation was perhaps born at the right time. On the one hand, they do not have to bear the immediate pressure of revolutionary discourse, which is on the brink of collapse. On the other hand, they still can take advantage of the discourse, using it as the context to give their film a political aura. In this sense, the Sixth Generation achieves a postmodern effect by using history as a dispensable background. In the 1990s, their strategy is to play the cards of both politics and commercialism in order to join the international film market. The Sixth Generation has a very strong sense of contemporary social life. Their impudent pastiche of the superficial phenomena of social life is in keeping with their instinctual refusal to bow to politics per se—they simply have no interest in political issues, and they use politics only as an empty signifier. Perhaps someday they may find a new narrative strategy.

The contemporary Chinese cinema has ineluctably turned away from the ideological and political center. Even in ideological, keynote films, ideological discourse appears extremely contrived and self-contradictory, because political life in China today has radically degenerated. Institutionally speaking, revolutionary discourse still maintains a certain degree of control, but it can no longer provide any intellectual or artistic substance to cultural production. The tension between the existing institutional power and the dysfunctional representational framework within the revolutionary discourse has created a great deal of contradiction in the cultural arena. A vicious circle occurs amid the constant displacement and deconstruction of the correlations between purpose and effect, signifier and signified, subject and object, and imagination and reality. Under such circumstances, the much inflated political discourse in film constructs only an illusory politics that sustains itself by reproducing, over and over, its imagined reality as a hyperreality. Such a hyperreality, however, has become effective insofar as it has become encoded by the global cultural imaginary, which produces and reproduces an imagined and an imagining China as a political entity both in history and in the contemporary world. As Baudrillard puts it, "the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced—the hyperreal."<sup>12</sup> This "always already reproduced" political reality has become the backbone of Chinese cultural production,

12. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 146.

from which contemporary cinema draws its vital sustenance. In the past, art served politics. But today, politics serves art. The stereotyped politics provides effective resources as well as necessary contexts for film. This is what I call the "postpolitics" in Chinese film today, where the dual aesthetic and cultural function of politics is essential.

Postmodernism, therefore, has incorporated the dazzling Chinese political, economic, and cultural environment into its own symbolic existence. Chinese postmodernism displays all the complexities and contradictions, and is caught between the odd correlations of cultural production and the revolutionary discourse. The parasitical/disobedient relationship between the domestic cultural production and the revolutionary discourse, and the subordinate/resistant relationship between the native and the global cultural imaginary have arbitrarily imposed a postmodern condition on China's cultural arena, a result of the massive historical displacements of social phenomena—lifestyles, values, concepts, and behavior patterns of vastly different cultural spaces and temporalities coexisting, intersecting, and jockeying for their legitimate positions in China today. The monolithic power center and its subsystems have all but crumbled, resulting in the paradoxically simultaneous dependence on and destruction of its foundations.

The incredible hybridization and heterogeneity of cultural and symbolic production have inevitably yielded a series of displacements: name/substance; purpose/effect; true/false; serious/playful; real/unreal; authority/clown; spirit/material; politics/economy; culture/commerce; tragedy/comedy; ritual/parody; love/lust; construction/deconstruction; dedication/deprivation; development/degeneration; progressive/conservative; and left/right; among others. The constant displacements and separations of these binary oppositions have produced a strange social and cultural ecosystem in which the real events always take place amid the cracks and fissures of the social order, disregarding the pompous and grandiose ideological myth and symbolism that still legitimize the very order and system. Under such an ecosystem, noble idealism and heroism are completely replaced by a real sense of comedy, manifested in a rhetoric of parody-travesty, irony, and black humor. Postmodernism thus emerges in Chinese social life as well as in cultural and cinematic productions and artistic experiments, not so much as a cultural construct of the artists, critics, and theorists, as is the case in the West, but as an enormous social text produced by the historical process of Chinese modernity in the age of globalization.

In the 1990s, the extent to which China has been integrated into the process of globalization and into its cultural imaginary is historically unprecedented. China stands at the historical conjuncture that, however uncertain and overdetermined, seems to have inevitably moved toward the final "end of history," or the ultimate triumph of global capitalism. The "progress of" world history, according to such a deterministic teleology, will leave only some residual imagination to contemporary Chinese culture. And cultural products cannot be anything but the residual by-products of globalization and its cultural imaginary. The postpolitical strategy of Chinese film today may continue to provide aesthetic resources and contexts for producing the image of the exotic Other for the world, as long as China continues to prosper on its way to modernity. But the question remains: Shall we lament China's failure to go beyond its historical limits, or shall we compliment its success in the global cultural market today?